

The Next Chapter

George Brummell's Journey Light for a Darkened Life

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Author Note

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And So We Begin.....

The scene was improbable. George Brummell, a blind veteran, occupied the back seat of a tandem bicycle hurtling down Route 1 through Vietnam's Hai Van Pass at 45 mph. "It crossed my mind what it might be like to go down on the road at this speed," he recalls. He need not have worried. His partner, pumping furiously from the front seat, was Greg LeMond, three-time Tour de France champion. What were the two riders doing in Vietnam in the first place?

The year was 1998 and George Brummell had returned to Vietnam, having lost his sight there in a mine explosion more than 30 years earlier. He was on a 16-day 1,250-mile bicycle trek through Vietnam, sponsored by World T.E.A.M. (The Exceptional Athlete Matters) Sports, a non-profit that organizes events for the disabled. The ride, billed as the "Vietnam Challenge," teamed people having disabilities with able-bodied participants. Those persons without use of their legs rode special hand-powered bikes, while blind riders pedaled from the back of tandem bikes. Together, the riders, 39 war-disabled American Vietnam veterans plus 14 war-disabled North Vietnamese soldiers, rode together from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly, Saigon). The event was later chronicled in the 1998 documentary *Vietnam, Long Time Coming*.

Surprisingly, Brummell had seriously considered returning to Vietnam even though his long nightmare with injury and blindness began in those jungles on the other side of the world. "I had no problem with that," he calls to mind. Most veterans he knew who had fought in that war expressed no desire to "go near the place." He had talked to some people who had gone back and explored the now peaceful country. "Wow, I'd like to have that opportunity, too. The opportunity came up and I participated."

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Even before he mounted that tandem bike in Hanoi, George Brummell had already been on a long journey. Born in Federalsburg, on Maryland's Eastern Shore in 1944, George seemed to have the odds stacked against him from the start. His parents divorced when he was just an

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infant. He was raised by his grandmother in Federalsburg's poor black neighborhood in a spare house that lacked an indoor toilet. Nevertheless, Susie Simms was a religious, hard-working woman who was employed in a local cannery and who grew her own vegetables. Even though she treated the young boy with the dignity she afforded everyone else, she was also a strict disciplinarian who cut the youngster little slack. Grandma Simms may have been illiterate, but she expected her grandson to do better in life.

Despite his grandmother's good intentions, George was offered little opportunity due to poverty, a broken family and segregation. He was very good in math but showed little interest in his other school subjects. Much like other adolescents in this kind of despairing situation, he "acted out" in the form of bad behavior that included gambling, drinking and a dangerous and destructive liaison with an older married woman.

George soon found himself on the wrong side of the law, and it finally took a Maryland jail cell to help focus his attention. Another school suspension and removal from his grandmother's home into foster care temporarily stabilized his dire situation.

In 1961, at age 17, he dropped out of high school and enlisted in the Army. The military became George Brummell's lifeline. He had little trouble with boot camp discipline, and many of his fellow soldiers became male role models he never had. George had always absorbed good ideas from those he encountered and admired. In the Army, he noticed men who made good soldiers and took cues from them. Highly competitive, he wanted to be the best.

Shared experiences and privations during a deployment to Korea, as well as another short deployment to West Germany for a NATO maneuver, solidified his intention to make the Army a career. "I was glad I'd chosen the military and happy to be off seeing the world," he muses. George reenlisted in February 1964.

While on a temporary assignment at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, he met Blanche, fell in love and got married. Six days after the wedding, George was on his way to his next overseas assignment --- South Vietnam.

The closest George had ever been to a war zone was his stint in Korea where active hostilities had ended 10 years before he arrived. Although tensions there were still high, bullets had not been directed at him or his buddies. But he soon would learn the jungles of Vietnam were different. "When we got there, it was nothing like we had trained for," George remembers. "It was a completely different operation."

Fighting an unseen enemy became an everyday routine as patrol followed patrol, and Viet Cong snipers did their dirty, stealthy work killing or wounding his comrades --- sometimes one or more at a time. After one brutal encounter with a hidden Viet Cong, George later recalled every member of his platoon spraying the jungle undergrowth with automatic rifle fire and hurling grenades in the direction of the VC sniper. "None of us got so much as a glimpse of the shooter," he relates. Every fearful step forward risked triggering a booby trap, mine, or another ambush. After their first two-week patrol, Viet Cong guerrillas had killed five of George's comrades and wounded seven. His platoon's return fire had not yielded a single confirmed kill.

More combat ensued. Following one jungle firefight, two soldiers from another platoon approached George's position carrying a stretcher. He recounts with sorrow. "My heart fell. Another one! Whoever it was, he was dead--a poncho covered his face. Who was it this time? Will it be me next?"

The young soldier's prescient thought came to pass just a month later while on another "search-and-destroy" mission. As he and several other soldiers slowly moved down a jungle road thought to be seeded with mines, a bulldozer moved just ahead, every so often scraping the surface to uncover or detonate a lurking explosive beneath.

George vividly recollects the deafening concussion that suddenly knocked him off his feet. "I felt myself whirling and flying, floating in a strange bubble of silence for what seemed like minutes. Then I started my descent, just as I was hit by a second, equally forceful explosion that slammed me to the ground with a jarring impact. Was I dying? Dead? The face of my grandmother popped into my head --- in her red head rag and green flowered dress."

Catching sight of that bulldozer's blade hitting the ground was the last thing the 22-year-old George Brummell ever saw. His life had changed forever.

Salvaging Life

George's injuries were catastrophic. He suffered burns over 60 percent of his body, and shrapnel fragments were embedded in his stomach. He sustained facial, chest, and leg injuries, and a broken arm and mangled left hand that would never fully function again. After initial assessment and treatment in Vietnam, he ended up at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, the Army's premier trauma hospital. When he pleaded with the medical staff to remove the bandages from his eyes, he heard a doctor say "The bandages are off." It was then he realized he was blind. Subsequent evaluations by ophthalmologists revealed that his vision would never return.

As with most patients who are suddenly blinded, George was predictably distressed and angry. He experienced a tremendous sense of loss, helplessness and self-pity. George would never see Blanche's face again or gaze upon the infant boy born while he was overseas. He remembers thinking at the dark, tormenting time, "Now what? How could I help raise my new son? What can a blind man do? I'd seen blind people and how vulnerable and pathetic they seemed, tapping their way down sidewalks, needing someone to guide them through airports, unable to drive, or read, or play catch with a child, or look into a wife's adoring eyes as they kissed." As he lay helpless in his hospital bed, George often thought being killed in Vietnam would have been a better outcome.

He insists it was his wife's acceptance of his injuries and her constant attention and support that enabled him to begin to salvage his life. Blanche joined him at Brooke and hardly left his side at the medical center. He remained there for several more months of additional surgeries, occupational therapy and recuperation before moving to Akron, Ohio, where Blanche's mother lived. It was now time for him to begin more intense training at the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital, located west of Chicago.

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George was fortunate. Hines had the nation's most advanced clinical programs in blind rehabilitation. At Hines, he was better able to accept his loss of sight after he had the opportunity to be around other blind people, some who had been sightless for many years. The skilled staff taught him how to sense subtle cues and function and navigate independently in a sighted world, everything from negotiating busy streets to reading a braille watch. "At Hines I had been taught not to carry any bills over a twenty and I had a billfold with three sections --- one for fives, one for tens, one for twenties. Singles I carried in my pocket."

Deprived of sight, George became acutely aware of his other senses --- sound and smell, and he learned to adapt to his surroundings. "I no longer could read people by their expressions, only their voices and actions," he remembers. He began dealing with the people he encountered with enhanced awareness. And the better he mastered and appreciated his new reality, the more he realized he could make a go of it. Blindness would not hold him back to make a new future for himself and his family. He left Hines VA Blind Rehabilitation Center in April 1967, just a year after being wounded.

In reality, George's new life was beset with misfortunes and personal heartaches. He returned to Akron to join Blanche, but finding a job that satisfied his ambition proved difficult. He found Goodwill Industries' make-work projects demoralizing such as tearing old electric lamps and irons apart and sanding furniture. Cracks in his marriage, which later resulted in divorce, also set him back as did another mindless job packaging light bulbs for \$1.30 an hour. "There was a little ironic humor in a blind man packing light bulbs," he recalls, "but there was bitterness, too. How I wished I could screw one of those bulbs in the top of my head and produce light for my darkened life!" Training to run a blind vending stand was equally unsatisfying and short-lived.

After flailing around for some time trying to jump-start his life, several of George's friends encouraged him to try college. Although he was a high school dropout and blind, he decided to give it a try. With a GED in lieu of a high school diploma, he began attending the University of Akron and thrived. While at UA, he was invited to a VA event in Cleveland where he was awarded vet-of-the-year for excelling in his university studies.

George took seven years to earn a bachelor's degree, and when he graduated from Akron, he enrolled in a master's program for social work at Case Western Reserve University. He never finished. An employment representative for the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) phoned him about two openings for field service representatives. George interviewed and got one of those jobs, relating, "Sometimes I regret not continuing and getting my master's and even a PhD, but I think I made the right choice because I could have had a masters degree or a PhD and no job. It was great and I really felt good having the job. But on the other hand, I was scared to death because I didn't want to fail." Understating his feeling of triumph at the time, he calls to mind "being both excited and frightened, but it wasn't a bad feeling." The new job would be aiding other blind veterans like himself, and George was more than ready to begin his new career.

Empathy, Expertise and Inspiration

George was responsible for visiting blinded or visually impaired veterans in seven states in the Midwest. His job duties included aiding them in applying and receiving VA benefits and

entitlements, and helping them settle long-active claims. He found he was very good at relating to blinded vets, many of whom were either living alone, down on their luck, and who had no one to help them navigate the Department of Veterans Affairs' bureaucracy. In many cases, he encouraged them to take advantage of the VA's blind rehabilitation programs. He says, "I wanted them to know that as a blind person, you can travel independently, be responsible, and get a job." His pitch was inspirational to many. Having been in that situation himself, he had expertise and a good dose of empathy.

His service to veterans led to lifelong friendships. One of the many people George aided during his career with the BVA was a visually impaired World War II vet with a frustrating and unsettled claim going back many years. After George's intervention, the claim was resolved to the tune of \$200,000. "My wife and I have been friends with the vet and his wife ever since. Years ago they invited us to their 50th wedding anniversary, and we had a place of honor at the head table." In 1994, George had married Maria, whom he met when she accompanied her cousin to a party for the visually impaired.

George's proficiency at his job eventually earned him a promotion to National Field Service Director of the Association, a post he held until 2004 when he stepped down. After being with the Blinded Veterans Association for 20 years, "I didn't want to be on the job until they kicked me out. I wanted to leave while I was on top so I left on a real high," he proudly says.

Turning Memoir into Print

George has never come down from that "high" during retirement, although he would be the first to downplay the meaning of the word "retirement." While attending undergraduate school at the University of Akron, he found he had a real talent for writing, a skill required for most of his courses.

At that time, George took on a project he had long contemplated--a memoir. He muses, "I had a man cave in the basement of my house. I couldn't sleep one night and went down to the basement and started recording my life story. The cassette tapes had 30 minutes on each side. I had my life story down on that 60-minute tape."

The problem: How to transcribe what he recorded. George's best efforts were not satisfactory because he could not see what he had typed. To help with his courses, he hired a woman paid by the VA to read and write for him, bearing in mind that "we didn't have computers like we have now." She typed the words and phrases that he missed on the tape. In time, he recounts, "thanks to the technology that allows a computer to 'speak' words, I could haltingly write and edit my thoughts."

In a remedial English course, George asked the instructor if he could use some of the material he had written for his memoir to hand in for a class assignment and she agreed. So George had her input as far as editing and critiquing and "doing her thing as an instructor." Two other instructors agreed to mark up and critique the other papers he turned in. George was not only honing his writing skills but also steadily moving ahead with his memoir.

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When he moved to Washington, DC, to assume his role as National Field Director, he continued to write. After retirement, George stayed in the game, volunteering at the VA Medical Center in Washington, recording veterans' stories while in VA hospice care. After the recordings were transcribed, he took them home to edit. "I'm one-handed so I'm a bit slow typing, but at one time I was up to 35 to 40 words a minute!" The biographies appeared in the VA Medical Center newsletter and circulated among the other hospitals in the VA system.

Once George learned to use a computer, he hired a woman who transcribed everything into a Word file. That proved to be a turning point because George could now go back and add to or edit what he had written. And that is how his memoir became reality. *Shades of Darkness: A Black Soldier's Journey Through Vietnam, Blindness, and Back* was published in 2006.

A New Pastime with Imagination

The memoir only stoked George's passion for writing, a pastime that nourished his imagination and creativity. And he was good at it. He loved reading novels but knew he could never compete in the fiction world. Because he has always loved young people, George contemplated writing a children's book. One day he and his wife Maria visited the Philadelphia Zoo to see a special exhibit on moles. Even though the animals were behind glass, she began describing their activity. "The moles were climbing on top of each other, traveling backwards and digging tunnels. It was all very fascinating and stimulating to me." When he returned home, he began researching this captivating mammal, coming across many other facts about moles.

George began working on a book with a mole as the protagonist. "Because of that animal's lack of vision, I figured that was a subject I knew well so I could apply some of my life to the story."

At the time, George's granddaughter Emma was learning to play the violin, and he began sharing his stories about moles with her. Emma instantly became an additional inspiration. He linked his main character --- the mole --- with the violin. Three years later in 2013, George published *The Mole and the Violin*.

Following that success, George had even more fun with the next installment in what was becoming a mole series, *The Mole and the Violin, Part Two: A Bunny's Odyssey*, published in 2018. This book features a growing cast of characters. The mole shares his adventures with a mouse and two rabbits that provide rapid transportation upon their backs for mole, mouse, and violin, eluding tormentors to find their way home.

And at this very moment, yet another children's book is already under way. In it, George will skillfully educate his youthful readers as they follow the plot of the new work. The mole and his friends will encounter two specialized worms -- a silkworm and an inchworm. The magical process of how the silkworm produces silk and how the inchworm measures the cloth made from it will result in a set of new clothes for the story's engaging characters.

What is the storyteller's creative routine? Down in his basement sanctuary, George savors a glass of wine as he begins writing in late afternoon. "Some people have a beginning and an ending when they write. I don't. I just write and get creative as I go along." That imagination, enhanced by a blind man's acute senses sharpened over the past 63 years, has illuminated the once "darkened life" of a truly extraordinary man.